ABSTRACT
         Few things have affected American education as much
as the changing face of its student population. American education
has been slow to implement multicultural education, and when it has
been implemented, it has taken on numerous forms. Multicultural
education takes so many different forms because no clear definition
exists. Some educators are reluctant to implement a multicultural
curricula because they do not recognize its importance. Incorporating
multicultural studies into an already overburdened curriculum
requires rethinking the entire curriculum and its implementation
rather than merely adding on to what already exists. Parents also
need support and instruction if they are to be active participants in
the school environment. While textbooks are often important
determinants of what students are expected to learn, they will always
be limited. Several researchers point out the problems with
implementing multicultural education. Some teachers fear the use of
multicultural literature because some parents want their children to
read only about their people, while others attack books about
minorities as racist. Research on multicultural education is flooding
educational literature, reflecting the issue's importance. The
changing population requires an examination of the current
curriculum. (Contains 17 references.) (RS)

Northern Illinois University

Literacy Report No. 22

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Karen Gersten

November 1995

Literacy Research and Reports

Curriculum and Instruction
Reading Clinic—119 Graham
DeKalb, Illinois 60115

Literacy Report No. 22

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Karen Gersten

November 1995

Multicultural Education

Few things have affected modern American education as much as the changing face of its student

population. An increasing number of students in American classrooms were born in other countries, and

these students bring to school their rich cultural backgrounds. American education has responded to this

cultural diversity with multicultural education. Yet like so many other educational concepts, multicultural

education is complex, multidimensional, and controversial. Before American education can be truly

multicultural, educators and the public must agree on a definition of multicultural education, believe it to

be important, and understand how it will affect traditional American education.

American education has been slow to implement multicultural education, and when it has been

implemented, it has taken on numerous forms. "Some teachers view it only as the inclusion of content

about ethnic groups into the curriculum; others view it as an effort to reduce prejudice; still others view it

as a celebration of ethnic holidays and events" (Banks, 1993, p. 25). Multicultural education takes so

many different forms because no clear definition exists. Even the experts in the field of multicultural

education offer diverse definitions. Janzen (1994) identifies two diametrically opposed and competing

views of multicultural education: Cultural pluralism, the goal of which is to maintain ethnic groups and

their idiosyncratic ways, while the goal of assimilationism is to absorb all groups into mainstream

America. Janzen sees these two opposing views as the cause of the confusion about multicultural

education. Banks (1993) identifies the following five dimensions of multicultural education: Content

integration; the knowledge construction process; prejudice reduction; an equity pedagogy; and empowering

school and social structures (p. 25). Howard (1993) suggests that part of the work of multicultural

education is the attempt to reach a peaceful transition to a new kind of America in which no ethnic or

cultural group is in a dominant position. Kellogg's (1988) definition requires multicultural education to

teach students to respect and understand diversity, while Norton (1990) sees more content-specific uses of

multicultural education in helping students expand their understanding of geography and natural history,

historical and sociological change, their literary appreciation, and their reading, writing, and thinking

skills. With the experts offering such a range of definitions, it is no wonder the classroom teacher is

unclear about just what his or her multicultural classroom should be.

Some educators are reluctant to implement a multicultural curricula because they do not recognize

its importance. Recent trends in immigration are one reason to broaden the curriculum. According to

Kellogg (1988), the children of recent immigrants are less prepared for school than were immigrant

children of past generations (p. 203). In addition, these children come primarily from Asian, Hispanic,

and Caribbean countries, and they bring with them a wide range of backgrounds, languages, and cultures.

First (1988) sees "an increasingly diverse student population [that] confronts an increasingly rigid school

environment" (p. 208). Currently 2.6 million children are classified as limited-English proficient, and

more than 6.3 million children speak a language other than English at home (McKeon, 1994). According

to Banks (1993), about 45.5% of the nation's school-age children will be people of color by 2020. A

traditional curriculum cannot possibly meet the needs of so many diverse children.

The changing student population is not, however, the only reason to change existing curricula.

The economy is another. Textbook companies will face a multicultural marketplace, and America is

dealing in an increasingly global economy. A successful American economy depends on culturally aware

Americans. A multicultural curriculum is one step toward a culturally literate society.

Once educators agree on the need for multicultural education and on its definition, their real work

begins. How do schools incorporate multicultural studies into an already overburdened curriculum? The

answer seems to be to rethink the entire curriculum and its implementation rather than merely to add on to

what already exists. Banks (Brandt, 1994) explains the need to transform the curriculum so children view

reality differently. But even Banks is sympathetic to any attempt to incorporate multicultural information.

"I think it's OK to start with Black History Month, as long as you don't stop there...You can't transform

the curriculum overnight" (p. 28). Ideally, though, Banks advocates examining topics in the current

curriculum from different points of view and changing teaching strategies so students from culturally

diverse backgrounds will learn more effectively. It is not necessary to abandon current studies; it is only necessary to study them differently.

Numerous educators have conducted and examined research to help achieve Banks' goals. Ladson-Billings' (1994) examination determined five areas important to educating a multicultural population. Those areas are teachers' beliefs about students, curriculum content and materials, instructional approaches, educational settings, and teacher education. She cited Winfield's (1986) findings that teachers generally expect more from caucasian students than from minority students and from middle-class than from lower class students. Such lower expectations lower achievement. She also found that a sincere commitment to multicultural education requires more than superficial celebrations of heroes and holidays; rather, it requires a regular curriculum that includes "a range of cultural perspectives" (p. 23). She advocates honoring the students' prior learning to move the students from where they are to where the teacher would like them to be and equalizing the quality of the schools where all American children learn. Finally, Ladson-Billings (1994) stresses the importance of ongoing teacher education. Teachers cannot change their teaching practices without instruction and support.

Parents also need support and instruction if they are to be active participants in the school environment. American-born parents may need help understanding the multicultural curriculum. Culturally diverse parents may need even more support and encouragement. Finders and Lewis (1994) conclude that "barriers...hinder some parents from participating in their child's education" (p. 50). They quote several parents who say they feel inadequate in school settings. This inadequacy can stem from language barriers as well as from cultural differences. For example, asking a child to translate for his/her parent during a conference is an acceptable American practice; in Latino cultures, however, it breaks a cultural norm. Getting culturally diverse parents to participate in their children's schooling requires education for both the classroom teacher and parents.

Students' education has traditionally come from textbooks. Garcia (1993) has studied research on

textbooks to determine the acceptance of multicultural education in American schools and to determine

whether multicultural textbooks make a difference. He discovered that diverse groups receive more

attention in today's textbooks than they have in the past but that such coverage is superficial. Overall,

Garcia concludes that "textbook authors do not attempt to suggest the interconnectedness of the world's

societies. Thus readers are provided with a limited view of multiculturalism" (p. 34). Garcia raises two

important questions concerning the role of textbooks in multicultural education. First, he questions a body

of research that has addressed the content of textbooks rather than their purpose. He suggests the

need for research on how teachers use textbooks in the classroom. Further, Garcia questions what

textbooks would look like if they were written by minorities. He suggests, again, a complex situation

where each minority would argue among itself about what its history would look like. Garcia's conclusion

is that, while textbooks are often important determinants of what students are expected to learn, they will

always be limiting. Even if all textbooks were multicultural, they would never cure education's problems.

Finally, several researchers point out the problems with implementing multicultural education.

Howard (1993) considers the changing role of caucasian Americans with the emergence of multicultural

education. He cites recent increases in racist acts as the American population diversifies. He notes reasons

for the white reluctance to change, and he suggests ways to move past this hesitation. He suggests the

need for honesty, humility, respect, and action because, ultimately, the issue of cultural diversity is "a

human problem, a struggle we are all in together"(p. 40).

Other researchers (Sacco, 1993; Smagorinsky, 1991) discuss censorship as a major deterrent to

multicultural education. According to these researchers, teachers fear the use of multicultural literature

because some parents want their children to read only about their people, while others attack books about

minorities as racist. Further, when a teacher selects certain multicultural literature to study, she omits

others. Therefore, the teacher is in effect censoring students' conceptions of other cultures. Smagorinsky

(1991) raises the following questions about developing a multicultural curriculum:

1. In striving for multicultural inclusion, which groups should teachers single out for their

    students to study?

2. Should teachers consider the potential offensiveness of a work?

3. Should teachers consider the moral, social, and political values in a text?

4. Should teachers strive for a balance between positive and negative images of various groups?

5. Should the teacher choose texts that students often misunderstand because of complex literary

    techniques?

6. Can teachers teach any problematic text so that it can be a valuable experience for any

    student? (pp. 216-217)

Although the author believes society needs to share the experiences of various minority groups,

Smagorinsky feels that sharing multicultural literature in a fair and equitable way is impossible. He

suggests that the best solution is to attempt to present literature that represents all people as complex and

balanced. Smagorinsky's warning is clear: Educators may be so focused on developing a fair and equitable

curriculum that they may lose sight of the secondary dangers and inequalities they themselves may be

creating.

Research on multicultural education is flooding educational literature. The amount of research is a

reflection of the issue's importance. The changing population requires an examination of the current

curriculum. If the existing curriculum cannot meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population, it needs

changing. Just how that curriculum will or should change is not yet clear. What is clear is that failure to

change will meet the needs of fewer and fewer American students. So change is necessary because failure

to change guarantees failure for students, for schools, and for society.

References

Banks, J.A. (1993). Multicultural education: Development, dimensions, and challenges. Phi Delta
      Kappan, 75 (1), 22-28.

Brandt, R. (1994). On educating for diversity: A conversation with James A. Banks. Educational
      Leadership, 51 (8), 28-31.

Finders, M., & Lewis, C. (1994). Why some parents don't come to school. Educational Leadership, 51
      (8), 50-54.

First, J.M. (1988). Immigrant students in U.S. public schools: Challenges with solutions. Phi Delta
      Kappan, 70 (3) 205-210.

Garcia, J. (1993). The changing image of ethnic groups in textbooks. Phi Delta Kappan, 75 (1), 29-35.

Howard, G.R. (1993). Whites in multicultural education: Rethinking our role. Phi Delta Kappan, 75 (1),
      36-41.

Janzen, R. (1994). Melting pot or mosaic? Educational Leadership, 51 (8), 9-11.

Kellogg, J.B. (1988). Forces of change. Phi Delta Kappan, 70 (3) 199-204.

Ladsen-Billings, G. (1994). What we can learn from multicultural education research. Educational
      Leadership, 51 (8), 22-27.

McKeon, D. (1994). When meeting "common" standards is uncommonly difficult. Educational
      Leadership, 51 (8), 45-49.

Norton, D.E. (1990). Teaching multicultural literature in the reading curriculum. The Reading Teacher,
      44 (1), 28-39.

Sacco, M.T. (1993). Enhancing multicultural literature by using the whole language approach in diverse
      settings while facing the censorship challenge. ED361 689.

Smagorinsky, P. (1992). Towards a civic education in a multicultural society: Ethical problems in
      teaching literature. English Education, 24 (4), 212-228.

Additional Resources

Carr, J.F. (1990). Cultural studies and curricular change. Academe, 76(6), 25-28.

Madigan, D. (1993). The politics of multicultural literature for children and adolescents: Combining

perspectives and conversations. Language Arts, 70(3), 168-176.

Wong, S. (1993). What exactly is multiculturalism? Emergency Librarian, 20(5), 25-27.

Young, J.T. (1992). Multicultural education and the college reading program. Forum for Reading,

23(1-2), 15-21.

LITERACY RESEARCH AND REPORTS ORDER FORM

No. of Copies

No. 11   Socio-Educational Influences on Standardized Reading
Tests, 1900-1991 [ED 335 662]
        by Peggy VanLeirsburg

No. 12   Assessment Literacy: Perceptions of Preservice and
Inservice Teachers Regarding Ethical Considerations
of Standardized Testing Procedures [ED 341 666]
        by Peggy VanLeirsburg & Jerry L. Johns

No. 13   Differences in the Written Recalls of Folktales Among
Above-Average, Average, and Below-Average Second-Grade
Readers [ED 346 442]
        by June E. Barnhart

No. 14   Pre-School, Kindergarten, and First-Grade Inventive
Spellers' Treatment of Onsets and Rimes
        by Donald J. Richgels, Lea M. McGee, & Jeanne M. Burns

No. 15   What Teachers Have Been Telling Us About Literacy Portfolios [ED 348 657]
        by Jerry L. Johns & Peggy VanLeirsburg

No. 16   From Traditional Reading Clinics to Wellness Centers [ED 349 544]
        by Jerry L. Johns

No. 17   Literacy Development in Preschool and Kindergarten Children: Patterns
Between Groups and Across Tasks
        by Donald J. Richgels & June E. Barnhart

No. 18   Teachers As Readers
        by Peggy VanLeirsburg & Jerry L. Johns

No. 19   The Role of Metacognition in Reading Comprehension: Implications for
Instruction
        by Barbara Abromitis

No. 20   Reading Workshop
        by Janet M. Wills

No. 21   Effective Phonics Instruction
        by Jackie Easley

No. 22   Multicultural Education
        by Karen Gersten

No. 23   Effectiveness and Creativity in the Resource Role   _____
          by Barbara Abromitis

Each report costs $3.50 (postage included). Actual postage costs will be added for large orders or overseas shipments.
Please remit in U.S. funds. Please make check or money order payable to the NIU Reading Clinic and send to:
Northern Illinois University, The Reading Clinic-119 Graham Hall, DeKalb, IL 60115.

Ship to:

Name   _____

Address   _____   Amount
                                                                             Enclosed
            _____

City   _____   State _____   Zip _____ $_____

Country   _____

☐   Place me on your mailing list

An ED number is given in square brackets following the citation for some reports. For approximately 98% of the
ERIC documents, the full text can be found in the ERIC microfiche collection. This collection is available in over 800
libraries across the country. Alternatively, you may prefer to order your own copy of the document from the ERIC
Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). You can contact EDRS by writing to 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110,
Springfield, VA 22153-2852, or by telephoning them at (800) 443-ERIC (3742) or (703) 440-1400.